

"DIVE" AND THE BROLGAS

WHEN the kitchen frogs took themselves off three or four weeks ago they carried away some vague memories that I have been trying ever since to piece together. Something had happened to me somewhere that involved frogs, Queensland, and the sea, but it was only today, when I was trying to pick up a fishing

AUGUST 8 launch off Curtis Island and picked up the naval tug instead, that my binoculars restored the missing links. They brought back a shooting trip near Bealey and a night of such frost as Queensland has never known, a log fire in a derelict hut, and a strange conversation with a Scot whose tongue was almost too thick for my Dunedin ears. His name I never asked, and would not repeat if I had heard and still remembered it, for he was a deserter from the Navy, whose arm is long. But it was quite clear to me that he was no coward or shirker. He was a foolish boy who had been punished for an offence for which somebody else was responsible—the atrocious crime of being pushed through a shop window by two drunken companions—

and he was too young to submit. He was also too young to know that the number of human mongrels at large was never small. No member of the shore party who knew the facts came forward to speak for him, and the last thing any of them thought of was combining afterwards to pay his fine. They were probably brave men in battle and undisturbed in a storm, but paying for their escapades was something they did only when authority caught them and locked them up. It was a lesson a boy had still to learn, and the quickest way to teach him was to run away and leave him in the hands of the policeman. This six of them did one dark night in Auckland, and the sequel was desertion twice, recapture twice, and then a wild dash into the Queensland bush. When I met him he had been on the run for six years, and was, I felt sure, safe as long as he abstained from drink and kept away from towns and cities. But he was eating his heart out for home and Scotland. I did not ask how he reached New Zealand from Australia, or if he had told his story to anyone else. I just hoped that he had not. When deserters were offered a pardon if they re-enlisted during the war I hoped he would hear of the offer and accept it.

But if he did it was the heather that called him back and not the Navy which had hurt him too deeply to be forgiven. It was the recurring lumps in his throat every time he thought of Fifeshire (which had starved him, but never branded him as a liar)—the suffocating homesickness which still returned after seven years (he was a year on service) and which brought this confession out of him in that Bealey hut: "I dinna mind tellin' ye that when I wawk up in yon Queensland boosh and haired the bullfrogs I lay greetin' like a kid for ma home." Tonight I saw the frogs again, but I hope there is no cause now for "greeting."

"HOW many brolgas make a hundred?" I asked him. "Five or six, or ten or twelve?"

"You'll see," he answered. But I have not seen. The floods following the cyclone tore holes in the track that no vehicle has yet been able to pass. But I believe I would have seen if I had arrived a month earlier or been able to stay a fortnight longer. The hundreds of brolgas and thousands of ducks and swans on

AUGUST 9 the plains of Curtis Island seem to be

facts. I have spoken to several people who have seen them, and to one who has seen a hundred acres of swamp white with ibises. It is tantalising to know that they are all less than 20 miles away and that we must return to New Zealand without getting closer to them.

The next best thing to seeing them with our own eyes is seeing them through eyes that are too matter-of-fact to magnify them. So we fell back on Dive. ("Call me Dive," he said. "The rest doesn't matter.") To him I thought birds would be something to shoot, eat and forget, but he was almost romantic about them. "I like seein' them," he told us. "I hate seein' people shootin' them for nothin'." Dive shoots them for food, a dozen or two as often as he is camped among them, but he spares hundreds, and I believe him when he says he sees thousands. I can't doubt after all I have heard that an inch of rain brings brolgas in hundreds, ibises in thousands, and ducks and swans in multitudes that no man can count. "I've seen the sky black with ducks for over a minute," Dive assured me, "and only the dingoes know how many swans there are." Dingoes, he explained, live on eggs and fledglings all through the spring, and when poultry get scarce they turn to pork. Veal, Dive thinks, is their third choice, but once they start on it they keep on it until the calves are too big to bring down. Though he had no figures he thought it probable that on this particular station (15,000 acres) the dingoes get one calf in three. The dingoes themselves he could not estimate, but "a fair guess," he said, "would be a hundred or more." The pig population he was sure was many hundreds, since he often saw mobs of one hundred and thought their breeding rate too fast for dingoes to overtake.

From all that wild-life, more, I suppose, than would be found on the same area anywhere out of Africa—I am separated by less than 20 miles of bush and two washed-out gullies. A painful thought.

(To be continued)



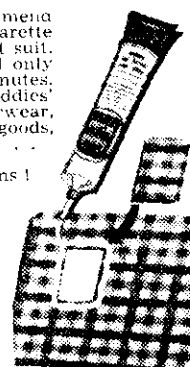
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